

Message Text

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S E C R E T BEIRUT 5048

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, MILI, LE, SY
SUBJECT: RECENT FIGHTING IN NORTH LEBANON

1. BEGIN SUMMARY. AS SEEN FROM HERE, THE RECENT FIGHTING IN NORTH LEBANON APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN AN ATTEMPT BY AT LEAST RIFAT AL ASSAD TO EXTEND SYRIA'S CONTROL INTO PARTS OF THE MARONITE MOUNTAIN HEARTLAND. SARG APPEARS TO REALIZE THE OPERATION WAS CLUMSILY EXECUTED. THE MARONITE MILITIAS FEAR, APPEARENTLY WITH SOME JUSTIFICATION, THAT THE SYRIANS ARE TRYING TO CUT THE CHRISTIANS OFF FROM THE MOUNTAIN HEARTLAND. THE MILITIAS MIGHT WELL RESPOND BY ATTACKS IN BEIRUT IF THE SYRIANS ATTEMPT FURTHER OPERATIONS IN THE NORTH. END SUMMARY.

2. THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS. A. WHILE REPORTS ARE SOMEWHAT CONTRADICTORY ON WHAT HAPPENED OVER THE LAST FEW DAYS IN NORTH LEBANON, WE BELIEVE THAT THE FIGHTING WAS PROBABLY A DELIBERATE ATTEMPT ON THE PART OF AT LEAST RIFAT AL ASSAD TO EXTEND SYRIAN

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CONTROL INTO PART OF THE MARONITE MOUNTAIN HEARTLAND. TO REVIEW:
IT APPEARS THAT:

-- ABOUT TWO WEEKS AGO THREE SYRIAN SOLDIERS WERE KILLED BY CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN ON THE CEDARS ROAD LINKING DAYR AL AHMAR AND BSHARRI.
-- USING THIS EVENT AS A PRETEXT, THE SYRIAN FORCES IN NORTH LEB-

ANON, UNDER THE COMMAND OF LT. COL. ALI DIB, MOUNTED A MAJOR OPERATION TO OPEN THE ROAD. THESE FORCES WERE FROM RIFAT AL ASSAD'S DEFENSE COMPANIES, RATHER THAN THE REGULAR SYRIAN ARMY.

-- ON AUGUST 24 THE SYRIANS BEGAN A CLEARING OPERATION IN BATRUN/KURA AREA, SUPPORTED BY HELICOPTERS AND ARTILLERY, TO PROTECT THEIR FLANK FOR THE CEDARS ROAD OPERATION.

-- FROM AUGUST 25 TO AUGUST 28 THE SYRIANS SUCCEEDED IN OPENING THE CEDARS ROAD BETWEEN BSHARRI AND DAYR AL AHMAR. IN THE PROCESS THEY OCCUPIED AYN ATA, A MAJOR STORAGE POINT FOR CHRISTIAN WEAPONS. THEY ALSO SURROUNDED THE TOWN OF BSHARRI.

-- DURING THE CEDARS ROAD CLEARING OPERATION, THE SYRIANS KIDNAPPED A NUMBER OF PEOPLE AND KILLED SIX PEOPLE FROM BSHARRI, WHOSE BODIES WERE FOUND IN THE CEDARS AREA. TWO OF THE DEAD PEOPLE WERE NEPHEWS OF BSHARRI DEPUTY SHEIKH HABIB KAYRUZ, AND ONE OF THESE NEPHEWS WAS AN AMERICAN CITIZEN.

B. ACCORDING TO ICRC REPRESENTATIVES, THIRTY PEOPLE WERE KILLED IN THE BATRUN/KURA AREA (L'ORIENT-LE JOUR SAYS 37). THE ICRC REPS ALSO SAID 10 TO 15 THOUSAND PEOPLE WERE DISPLACED AT LEAST TEMPORARILY IN THIS AREA, AND THAT ONLY 200 PEOPLE REMAIN IN THE VILLAGE OF KUR, WHICH ORIGINALLY HAD A POPULATION OF 2,000.

3. SYRIAN BEHAVIOR. A. AS SEEN FROM HERE, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE OPERATION WAS NOT APPROVED BY PRESIDENT HAFIZ AL ASSAD. AS INDICATED ABOVE, THE TROOPS INVOLVED IN THE CEDARS ROAD OPERATION WERE MEMBERS OF RIFAT AL-ASSAD'S DEFENSE COMPANIES RATHER THAN REGULAR ARMY SOLDIERS. CAMILLE CHAMOUN'S AIDE, NABIL NOUJAIM, SECRET

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TOLD EMBOFF AUGUST 30 THAT RIFAT AL-ASSAD WAS RESPONSIBLE. MOREOVER, ASSIM QANSUH, HEAD OF THE PRO-SYRIAN BAATH PARTY IN LEBANON, HAS CALLED ALI DIB, THE COMMANDER OF THE OPERATION, "MENTALLY UNBALANCED."

B. SARG APPEARS TO REALIZE THAT THE OPERATION WAS CLUMSILY EXECUTED. SAMI KHATIB PAID AN UNEXPECTED VISIT TO DAMASCUS THE AFTERNOON OF AUGUST 29, WHERE HE MET WITH CHIEF OF STAFF HIKMAT SHIHABI. AFTER KHATIB'S RETURN TO BEIRUT THE EVENING OF AUGUST 29, THE ADF ANNOUNCED THAT SYRIAN SOLDIERS SUSPECTED OF CRIMES COMMITTED DURING THE CEDARS OPERATION, ESPECIALLY THE KILLING OF THE SIX PEOPLE, WOULD "BE REFERRED TO THE SPECIAL INQUIRY COMMISSION ESTABLISHED IN FEBRUARY OF THIS YEAR." (THE COMMISSION IS A MIXED LEBANESE-SYRIAN TRIBUNAL CREATED AFTER THE FAYYADIYAH INCIDENTS IN FEBRUARY.) THE COMMISSION, THE ADF ANNOUNCEMENT SAID, WOULD QUESTION THE SUSPECTS AND REFER THOSE BELIEVED GUILTY TO THE COURTS FOR TRIAL.

C. IN ADDITION, ACCORDING TO BOTH RIGHTIST NEWSPAPER LE REVEIL AND NABIL NOUJAIM, AS A RESULT OF KHATIB'S TALKS IN DAMASCUS:

-- THE SYRIAN COMMANDER IN THE NORTH, ALI DIB, HAS BEEN REPLACED BY COLONEL MUHAMMAD ALLUSH; -- THE SYRIAN TROOPS HAVE WITHDRAWN FROM THE TOWN OF THE CEDARS.

D. WE DOUBT, HOWEVER, THAT THE ABOVE MEASURES ARE SUFFICIENT TO CALM CHRISTIAN FEARS. NABIL NOUJAIM TOLD EMBOFF AUGUST 30 THAT THE NORTH REMAINED "VERY TENSE."

4. CONSEQUENCES. A. THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE FIGHTING IN NORTH LEBANON ARE SERIOUS. THE MILITIAS IN EAST BEIRUT AND ELSEWHERE FEAR THAT THE SYRIANS ARE TRYING TO CUT THE MILITIAS OFF FROM THE MARONITE HEARTLAND IN THE MOUNTAINS. (THERE MAY BE GROUNDS FOR THESE FEARS. ASSIM QANSUH TOLD EMBOFF AUGUST 28 SYRIANS WERE CONSIDERING MOVING ON BYBLOS AREA. SEE BEIRUT 5025). REFLECTING THE STATE OF MARONITE EXCITEMENT ON THE ISSUE, LE REVEIL CARRIED BANNER HEADLINE ON AUGUST 30 SAYING "BSHARRI RISES UP AGAINST THE SYRIAN PRESENCE."

B. THE OPERATION IN NORTH LEBANON HAS INCREASED CHRISTIAN SUS-
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PICIONS ABOUT SYRIAN INTENTIONS AND MADE IT MORE DIFFICULT FOR ANYONE TO CONVINCE THE MARONITE PARTIES THAT THE SYRIANS ARE NOT HERE TO CRUSH THE PHALANGE AND NLP POLITICALLY AND MILITARILY. IF THE SYRIANS SHOULD CONTINUE OPERATIONS IN THE NORTH, THE CHRISTIANS MIGHT WELL BE MORE APT TO LAUNCH ATTACKS IN EAST BEIRUT AND ELSEWHERE IN THE HOPE OF PROVOKING ISRAELI INTERVENTION.
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